Synopsis

On the Trail of Mysteries:

Detextualizing the Criminal and the Detective in Crime/Detective Fiction

Detective fiction and its narrative framework have had a powerful impact on the popular imagination from its very origin and they continue to have that dominating role in the culture industry in general and literary sphere in particular. Detective fiction is a subgenre of a broad category of the popular canon, namely, crime fiction that has got variant and diverse forms. Among the variants of crime fiction, detective fiction is the most popular form when analyzed using the paradigms of both literature and market economy. Detective fiction usually depicts murder, followed by an investigation by a scientific detective of both the crime and the context in which it took place, followed by the apprehension and conviction of the criminal. In short detective fiction is all about rational solution to the crime. Despite this excessively formulaic structure, and familiar elements following certain traditional rules, it gets mass reception by exploiting anxiety and fear in the readers to produce a suspenseful narrative.

Usually detective narratives and other similar popular genres are considered as non-canonical literature for sickrooms and newsstands in railway platforms and bus stations. For the same reason, they were set off from the academic realms, and have hardly been subjected to a theoretical inspection and serious critical scrutiny in the past. However, with the development of a new sensibility and the paradigm shift in approaches to popular culture in the wake of the post-structuralist theoretical framework that offended the conventional norms of literary criticism, the historical, sociological and psychological reasons for the enduring popular appeal of detective narratives, its polemics, form and ideology received critical attention from academia later on. Detective narratives of the past and present are a great source of cultural awareness and the impact of these discourses cannot be underestimated.

This research project entitled *On the Trail of Mysteries: Detextualizing the Criminal and the Detective in Crime/ Detective Fiction* is premised on a constructionist approach that involves the examination of different detective novels/stories as well as consideration of the connections between these texts, the historical/sociological contexts, the discourses towards which they contribute and the "realities" they construct. It a lso attempts an ideological critique of the socio-political contexts of the emergence of detective fiction as a form of literature and the reasons for its ascendance into the stature of the most popular literary narrative. A detective narrative requires a person, the detective who is uniquely able to decode the puzzle through varying means including rationality, forensic science and re-enactment. At the moment of revelation in which the enigma is explained, the narrative needs another person, the criminal who is identified and treated as savage, irrational and inhuman. This study focuses on the texts and contexts from the detective stories of Edgar Allen Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle and the Golden Age tales by G. K. Chesterton and Agatha Christie in support of an argument that these narratives construct a Western, intellectually superior hero, the detective, who points to the rationality of science and Christian ethics and hunts down the more inferior " creature", the criminal. This research project therefore focuses on the socio-political, cultural contexts and the literary narratives that materialized in the same milieu. This leads to the inference that the emergence of detective fiction as an exceptional literary form coincides with the creation of the modern bureaucratic state, development of police, and transition of penal mechanism from its primitive and violent forms to modern and "humane" disciplinary practices .

The first chapter is an enquiry into the problematique of crime and criminality – the social and moral contexts on which crime and law are premised. The governmental procedures of detection, surveillance, punishment and the emergence of criminology as a systematic body of knowledge are subjected to analysis in the light of the theoretical postulates of Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School, Luis Althusser and Michel Foucault. This chapter also analyses certain canonical texts having the narrative framework of detective fiction, namely, *Oedipus Rex*, *Crime*

and Punishment, *Scarlet Letter* and *The Trial* as they textualise how the dominant myths, religious confinements, sexual morality, surveillance and bureaucratic culture of modernity construct criminal subjectivities. It also inquires how individuals (their freedom) are forced to reconcile with the norms of society and the way in which they are stigmatized as culpable subjects as well as the social mechanism of their extermination.

The second chapter attempts a historical overview of the evolution of detective fiction and exposes the fact that the growth of detective fiction as an Anglo-American literary tradition coincides with the exponential expansion of certain systems of knowledge and scientific techniques in the nineteenth century. It also studies its impact on criminal investigation, legal system, jurisprudence and penal mechanism. This chapter brings out the ideological strategies of the deployment of realism as the narrative technique in detective fiction. This chapter attempts to answer why and how the presence of a scientific detective as the protagonist/ hero convinces the post-Enlightenment public sphere about the mechanism and the sceintificity of truth production involved in the art of investigation. It involves the analysis of the detective's elevation into a cultural icon of the western canon. This chapter deals with how the suspenseful narrative pattern of the detective stories plays a psychological drama by generating anxiety and fear in the reader. It shows how the investigation story pacifies the emotional destabilization made by the criminal actions in the reader. This chapter employs the Foucauldian framework to find the ideological effect of using certain systems of knowledge that emerged in the same period and that embellished and backed the art of investigation and identification of criminal "others".

The third chapter exposes the dialectic of detective fiction that, despite being a popular literary genre that employs the principles of rationalism and empiricism of European Enlightenment, reiterates the dominant principles of British morality and its Christian legacy. It examines the social and cultural heritage of secular Britain that adheres to the Christian practices of retributive justice to sustain the social and moral order. It attempts a textual analysis of the fictions of Conan Doyle, G. K. Chesterton and Agatha Christie to illustrate their reconstruction of

the sentimental attachment of the British with the Christian faith in the enduring battle between good and evil, and the triumph of the former. This chapter verifies how the detectives share these sentiments, the attempts to retain the moral and sacred order of secular British society and the historical advantage of building up a Christian hero.

The fourth chapter examines how detective narratives from Poe's inaugural adventure construct the appalling, and at the same time alluring, image of the Orient which was used to underpin and legitimize British colonialist and imperialist undertakings. Detective fiction, reflective in its narrative terrain, treats colonialism as a theme to form clearly a British text engaged in constructing an Orientalist discourse. This chapter also undertakes the task of unravelling the discursive patterns built on the binary oppositions of East and West, and the dichotomies that were unequal in establishing the West as more progressive, while viewing the Orient as static, non- progressive, savage and uncivilized. It also discusses how the detective hero and the chronicles of his adventures fighting the dangerous class within English society and those from the foreign/colonial land. This analysis underlines the sharp contrast between the morally, rationally and intellectually superior hero of the West to the irrational and mysterious "criminals" in the Orient. The analysis is done usi ng the postcolonial theoretical perspectives, mainly of Edward W. Said. These detective chronicles paint the Indians, non-British Europeans, Communists and the Arabs in animal images effecting demonisation and dehumanization of these groups. It also examines the nuances of the discursive construction of terrorism and "Islamophobia" in the detective narratives as a pol itical representation of the Anglo-American hegemonic world order.

The findings and inferences of each chapter are briefed in the conclusion. The study sees detective fiction as a narrative of the struggle between the criminal and the detective as well as a genealogy of modern penal practices. Different narratives analyzed in this study treat crime as a symptom of disorder, anarchy, irrationality and lack of ethical and moral sensibility. This study leads to the inference that detective fiction plays an important role in the way bureaucratic

procedures of crime detection, discursive knowledge, surveillance, punishment and functional purposes of moral policing by the social and religious institutions and dogmas are experienced and understood. These representations tend to naturalise and legitimise the use of surveillance by authority, encouraging citizens to consent to state-sanctioned systems of law, detection, and punishment.

The enjoyment of detective fiction lies in this restoration of order and the narration of this adventurous mission framed in suspenseful structure. The significance of this study is that it attempts to problematise the ideological and narrative structure of detective fiction that has been grounded and cultivated in the cultural terrain of Anglo-American social, political and historical contexts. This study also highlights its role as a western popular canon that endorses and expresses the pervasive culture of social discipline.